

When you think about demonic activity, what comes to mind? People levitating or climbing up walls or having their appearance changed? It's something that we might imagine while watching a horror movie, or think of as happening in Satanic cults and their activities, but the idea of demons assaulting the Church is something that seems distant or abstract. It happens in theory and maybe "out there," but not so much in our day-to-day lives. The truth, however, is rather different.

The pastors of our circuit have been reading a book on exorcism, and some of the insights from that book have helped me realize the extent of these attacks. For example, when the author, a Roman Catholic priest and exorcist, first started as an exorcist in 2005, he was one of about twelve official exorcists in the whole country. Now there are around 125. Why the increase? Tragically, an increased need. The author states that when he first started, he would get about 100 requests for assistance a year. Now, he is up to over 1800.

As our country and culture push God and His Word out, whether in open rebellion or in the name of "religious freedom" or "tolerance," Satan and his demons are coming in to fill the void. And so that's why knowing God's Word, such as our Gospel lesson today, is so important, for it is the Word that is the Sword of the Spirit and our greatest weapon against the evil one.

When you think of the attacks of Satan upon Jesus, you probably think about when he tempts Jesus in the wilderness. That's probably the most obvious instance. But as St. Luke records for us, when the devil was forced to leave Jesus, he didn't go away forever, but rather waited for a more opportune time.

The attacks come on and off throughout Jesus' earthly ministry, and they really pick up in Holy Week, that last week of Jesus' earthly ministry before He is crucified. The devil presses then, because if Jesus ends up paying for the sins of the world, then his power to accuse and condemn is gone. Our Gospel lesson takes place in this week, and in these attacks upon Jesus by the Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, lawyers, and Herodians, it's really the devil at work.

When we look at our Gospel lesson, we see how the devil works, both attacking Christ and attacking those who bear Christ's name. And we also see how to drive away the devil by the power of God contained in His Word.

Right at the start of our text, we see a characteristic of the devil's attacks. "Then the Pharisees went and plotted." Jesus had just rebuked them, showing in parables how they were rejecting the very God they claimed to serve. So did they admit defeat and leave for good? No! They left to plot, to plan their next attack. They weren't going to give up.

Satan didn't give up when Jesus rebuked him in the wilderness, but left to plot, to attack Jesus at a more opportune time. Likewise, Satan is constant in his assaults on Christians. He doesn't take certain times of the year off, or give you plenty of warning that he's coming on such and such a date with this particular temptation or trap.

Sometimes his attacks are open. Other times, he withdraws, though not permanently, but to plot and scheme and think up his next assault. The Bible describes him as a lion constantly on the prowl to seek someone to devour.

Since Satan's attacks are constant, we Christians must be constant in our vigilance and preparation. This is what Jesus directs us to in the Gospel we heard on Reformation Sunday: abiding, remaining constantly, in His Word.

When we dwell in His Word, it is kept on our minds, in our ears, and on our lips, giving the devil no room or foothold there. Through the Word, the armor of God is kept securely fastened over our souls, protecting us from the arrows and flaming darts the devil is constantly hurling at us. When the light of the Word burns brightly in our hearts, the shadows in which the demons hide are pushed back.

The devil constantly seeks to attack, and so Christians must be constantly in the Word.

Yet another element of Satan's attacks is shown in the following verse. Having plotted, who do the Pharisees send to attack Jesus? Their own disciples... and the Herodians. This is quite remarkable, because the Pharisees and the Herodians hated each other.

The Pharisees saw the Herodians as liberals who would happily throw out God's Word for the sake of political benefit, and the Herodians saw the Pharisees as legalistic conservatives who were stuck in their old ways and refused to get with the times. And yet here they are, together, attacking Christ.

When it comes to assaulting Jesus and His Church, the devil is able to make allies out of the most unlikely of people. And then, he uses that alliance as evidence that his attack is right. It would be like having the Democrats and the Republicans agree on something. If those two groups, who hate each other, are agreeing about something, then it must be right, yes?

So these groups come to Jesus in a display of false unity, so that any party of Jew can get onboard with being against Jesus. And to be with Jesus then is to be against pretty much all of the Jewish temple crowd.

This attack is still very much used by the devil. He loves to get different, often-opposed groups together to attack Christianity.

For one example, think back to COVID and the church shutdowns. One side would desire to close churches down because they see Christianity as silly nonsense with no meaning or usefulness. The other side also said we should shut down churches, because that's what it means to honor our authorities like the Bible says we should.

Suddenly, if you didn't think that churches should shut down for long periods, you're being opposed by two groups that normally don't get along. The pressure is huge! And all the while, Satan rejoices as God's people are unable to gather together, to receive God's gifts, to hear God's Word, to strengthen each other in the fellowship of believers.

Or as another example, look at abortion. One side is totally for it, demonically calling it "healthcare" and "justice." The other side says that, while abortion isn't the best, you have to make

compromises so you can get in power, and so we should focus on other issues and not be so “extreme” in our viewpoints.

Maybe being fully pro-life – as the Bible speaks – isn’t best, we think. Meanwhile, the blood of children is poured out all over our country, and as the Bible shows, Satan and the demons delight in the torment and destruction of children.

Against the devil’s attack of common consensus and peer pressure, we must remember what it is that we are to be grounded upon. God’s Word is the rock upon which the Church stands. Not popular opinion. Not rational arguments. The Word.

The whole world may and will seem united against Christ and His truth. But as our Lord reminds us, this world is passing away. The Word of the Lord endures forever. At the end of all things, it will be God who is shown righteous, not this world. It will be the Word that is shown to be true, not all the various opinions, ideas, and lies that the world raises against it.

And when the Word proves unpopular, that just shows that it is right, for our Lord tells us in the Word: “For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”

Now we move on to the main thrust of the attack on Christ in our text, which shows two more ways in which Satan loves to attack Christ and His Christians. The Pharisees want to entangle Jesus in His words. The first element of this is mixing truth with lies, especially starting out with truth.

Listen to the words these Pharisees and Herodians lead with: “Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone’s opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances.” This is all exactly true. Jesus is a teacher, The Teacher come from God. And He is true and teaches truthfully. And, He teaches what is true, not changing based on what people think of Him or how they appear. All correct.

But why are they saying these things? Is it an honest statement of praise and adoration to Jesus? No, of course not. They are attempting to “butter up” Jesus, to use truth in an attempt to feed His pride (though He doesn’t have any), so that they may trap Him in falsehood later.

This trap is the second element of this demonic attack, using that truth to set up some sort of false argument, in this case a “false dilemma.” That’s where someone presents an issue or problem as having fewer choices or answers than there actually are. Often it’s two things proposed that seem opposite, and you are forced to choose one, even though the truth might be neither, or that both can be chosen.

Listen to the words of the Pharisees’ disciples: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” Two options: pay taxes to Caesar, or don’t pay taxes to Caesar. They think they’ve got Jesus here, because if He says that you must pay taxes to Caesar, He’ll lose His popularity with the crowds (whom the Pharisees are afraid of) and then they’ll be able to kill Him, or maybe even have an anti-Roman mob do the deed for them. And if Jesus says that you shouldn’t pay taxes to Caesar, then they’ve got Him as a rebelling against the Roman authorities, and then Rome will take care of Him.

Satan loves to use this attack against the Church. Think about the devil's attacks on marriage. How often did you hear something along the lines of "If you don't approve of gay marriage, you must hate gay people and want them all to burn in hell." What are the options there? Either (a) approve of gay marriage, or (b) want people to burn in hell. What's a Christian supposed to do there?

Or more currently, this is used all the time with the transgender movement. "If you don't affirm trans people in their chosen identities and use their preferred pronouns and encourage them in their transition efforts, then you're wanting them to all commit suicide." Again, your options are (a) affirm transgenderism, or (b) desire people to kill themselves. Which do you go with?

Picking any option seems to go against what God says in His Word, which is why Satan loves to use these attacks. He presents these and then makes it seem like God's Word must contradict itself and so it's not true or trustworthy. When Satan gets us to doubt God and His Word, we're that much closer to falling into his grasp.

How do we defend against these attacks? Again, our weapon is God's Word. Jesus takes the Word spoken through Moses and the prophets and breaks down the Pharisees' false reasoning. "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

God's Word had shown that God raises up earthly governments to do His will. Through the prophet Jeremiah, God told His people to live in peace in exile in Babylon, and even to seek the good of the city and to pray for it, despite the fact that it was just as idolatrous as Rome.

And at the same time, the Scriptures make clear that all of creation belongs to the Lord; nothing is outside His authority or ownership. Thus all things are His. To attempt to set the government against God was a false argument. God had put Caesar on the throne, and as far as Caesar demanded of the people what they were ordered by God to give to him, including taxes, then it was not going against God to pay those taxes.

So, when the devil seeks to ensnare us with words of truth corrupted with lies, we look to the Word, for as Jesus promises, "you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." When Satan would seek to hide the right path in darkness and shadows, then we turn to the Word, for as the Psalm declares, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."

Joined to God's Word is prayer, especially prayer for wisdom. Through the wisdom that our Lord gives by His Spirit dwelling within us, we are able to better see the devil's snares, to recognize the lies and deception for what they are. Our Lord gives us this promise in His Word: "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him."

God will give wisdom. Wisdom may not lead to worldly blessings, as the verses that follow that passage tell us, but it will lead us to realize what is truly important and to find joy in the eternal blessings that God has in store for us.

Wisdom grounded in God's Word will let us expose the lies of the devil, such that so called "gay marriage" is not in line with God's created purpose for humanity but rather causes all sorts of problems for those ensnared in it and society as a whole.

Wisdom and God's Word let us see that God created people male and female, and that the truly loving thing to do when speaking to people ensnared in Satan's delusion of transgenderism is to

lovingly speak the truth, for it is the truth, not well-meaning lies, that set people free from the devil's grasp.

Satan is relentless in his attacks, his demons constantly seeking to afflict and destroy. But our Lord is constant in His vigilance over us, especially as His Word dwells in our hearts.

Satan seeks to make us feel alone and isolated, as though the entire world is against us. But with us stands the God who created the world, and whose Word will endure even after the heavens and the earth have passed away.

Satan is the father of lies, constantly deceiving and misleading as he tries to direct as many people down the broad and easy path to hell as he can. But against him stands the Lord Jesus Christ, whose Word is the truth that sets free and whose wisdom shines forth into the darkness, revealing the path to paradise.

We Christians are called to be wise and alert against the snares of the devil, for he and his demons do exist. And yet, we need not fear them, for our Lord Jesus has crushed the evil foe beneath His cross. Satan thought he had finally won at the cross, but there his power was broken and life was given for all men. When Satan is permitted to give us crosses, it may seem like he's winning, but the truth is that God is using those crosses to bless us, both now and into eternity.

In the name of Jesus, amen.